

BOMBING IN MIAMI

Anti-Semitism and the Segregationists

NATHAN PERLMUTTER

THE dull boom in the evening of March 16, unusual but not frightening, that announced the bombing of the Nashville Jewish Community Center echoed the thunder blast that eighteen hours earlier, in the hushed stillness of 2:30 in the morning, shattered Miami's Temple Beth El school annex.

In Miami the damage was extensive. The explosion tore a gaping hole in the concrete rear wall of the school. It hurled a section of iron railing, cemented to the rear steps of the building, one hundred and fifteen yards onto the roof of a private home. The school's roof and walls were lifted from their foundations. In Nashville a lady had thought that the sound of the explosion was her next-door neighbor's traveling bags dropping to the floor. In Miami most of the shaken neighbors said their first thought was that an airplane had crashed.

The detonation, originally estimated as the product of twelve sticks of dynamite, later at approximately twenty sticks, flushed excited, night-clothed residents out of their homes into the Sunday morning dark as police cars, fire engines, and ambulances screamed into the blast area. Fearful of panic if word of a "synagogue bombing" raced through the alarmed neighborhood, police

told the gathering crowd that it had been a gas explosion. The explosive charge had already been located, however—wrapped, ironically enough, in paper *yarmelkes*, stolen from an outside storage bin.

That it was not a gas explosion but an act of premeditated violence was announced within twenty minutes after the explosion to two separate parties. Rabbi Abraham Levitan, in no way connected with Temple Beth El, was jarred from sleep by an insistent telephone. In what he described as a German or a foreign accent, his caller warned that if Rabbi Levitan did not stop preaching integration in his synagogue it would suffer the same fate as Temple Beth El. Soon after the call to Rabbi Levitan the phone in the complaint room of the Miami Police Department started ringing. The desk officer picked up the receiver, was informed of the explosion, and was advised that more bombings would follow unless "segregation" or "integration" was stopped in Miami—the officer wasn't sure which term the caller used. Both telephone calls were made before the newspapers knew about the blast, or if they were aware of it, before they knew it was caused by something other than a gas explosion.

In Nashville, too, within fifteen minutes of the bombing, a rabbi, William B. Silverman, received a telephone call. His caller, "a member of the Confederate Union," boasted of the dynamiting, warned that the Rabbi's temple would suffer the same fate that "any other nigger-loving place or nigger-loving person" would. However, the parallelism present in the Miami and Nashville bombings requires a footnote. The Jewish Community Center in Nashville had been visited by Negroes as guests of the Red Cross and other organizations which met at the Center building. Rabbi Silverman himself,

THE attempt to inject anti-Semitism into the struggle over desegregation presently convulsing the South has been signalized by a series of bombing attempts on Southern Jewish religious institutions. Last month Jackson Toby reported on the "Bombing in Nashville." Here NATHAN PERLMUTTER discusses the Miami bombing. Mr. Perlmutter is director of the Florida office of the Anti-Defamation League and has written for the *New Leader*, *Nation*, *Progressive*, and other magazines. He contributed "Evangelist Demagogue, 1952 Model" to our number of October 1952.

while not connected with the Center, had voiced clear opinions that were anathema to hoodlum extremists. The crime in Nashville, in the eyes of its perpetrators, was an act of retaliation for the offense of "desegregation."

But Temple Beth El is Orthodox, all the way. There are temples in Miami and in Miami Beach from whose pulpits their rabbis have discussed the desegregation issue. Study groups have listened to speakers on the subject and held group discussions, moving on to book reviews of *Marjorie Morningstar*. Not so Temple Beth El. The bulk of its congregation are quiet, elderly people for whom the synagogue is strictly a place for worship. (Rabbi Shmaryahu Swirsky, former spiritual leader of Temple Beth El, once said to me: "Sometimes there is a knock on my study door, and I pray, I pray hard that when I say 'Come in,' there will enter a young face. Do you realize, can you realize, how many weeks on end go by without my seeing a young face, how much we in Orthodoxy are in the company of *old* people?") The Miami crime, even by the lights of its own perpetrators, was clearly a case of knocking at the wrong door.

THE news of Sunday morning's bombing was reported in Monday morning's *Miami Herald*. That was March 17. But by that time the predictable reactions to the bombing were already in. Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish leaders called Sidney Palmer, President of Beth El, with offers of help. The police poured full-strength resources into the investigation. Unmarked night patrols were posted around the synagogues of Greater Miami. Radio Station WQAM offered a \$1,000 reward for information leading to the conviction of the culprits. A cash reward was offered by a Veterans of Foreign Wars post and the national Jewish War Veterans. Individuals posted offers of small rewards. Meanwhile, as churches in the Beth El area volunteered the use of their classrooms for the bombed school's students, Harry Cohen, Florida commander of the Jewish War Veterans, diverted miscellaneous

veterans from assuming personal responsibility for protecting synagogues. On the morning of March 17, the *Miami Herald* called the dynamiting "a disgraceful incident," and soberly observed: "There must be no jumping to conclusions. Placing of the motive behind this criminal act might well serve as a guide to law enforcement officials to forestall repetition."

That afternoon, the *Miami News* wondered editorially whether more violence for Miami was in store. With an eye north to Nashville, it surmised: "There is now reason to believe that Sunday's bombing may be part of a reign of terror planned for the South by the White Citizens Councils. Whether the plans are born locally or are part of a nationwide scheme, the important thing is to stop them." On the same afternoon, the liaison committee of the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League convened at the call of the committee's respective co-chairmen, David Fleeman, prominent local contractor, and Paul Seiderman, one-time New York Rackets Bureau chief. Immediately broadening itself to include the Rabbinical Association of Greater Miami, the American Jewish Congress, and the Jewish War Veterans, the committee issued a statement to member agencies of the Combined Jewish Appeal. Assurances were given that the police were conducting a thorough investigation, that information from the files of the agencies had been shared with the police, and that all pertinent information would be shared with the organized Jewish community.

By March 21, only five short days after the bombing, the story seemed to have just about run its course. But the Nashville bombing earlier, and subsequently the bombing, in Jacksonville, of the Jewish Center Synagogue and the Negro James Weldon Johnson School on April 28, and the bombing attempt on Temple Beth El in Birmingham (the dynamite did not go off), also on April 28, made it appear most unlikely that the Miami blast was a mere accident or one-shot affair.

For the old-timers in Greater Miami—and seven years' residence in that boom town

makes one an old-timer—a Miami News editorial of six years ago rang hollowly: "While the investigation is being pressed, it is up to the public to remain calm. True, no relaxing of the probe must be permitted. . . . Arrest of those responsible for the bombings must come. But finding them is, at best, a difficult task and calls for the patience and forbearance of the public." The date of that editorial was December 31, 1951. In a rash of violence ten different explosions had rocked Negro and Jewish edifices and a Catholic Church. All the crimes, as well as the Christmas 1951 bomb-slaying of Harry Moore, NAACP official of Mims, Florida, remain unsolved. "Patience and forbearance" had prevailed.

At this writing, the bombing of Miami's Temple Beth El also remains unsolved. Police investigations have reached as far north as Pompano Beach and have covered an area of two hundred miles. Southeastern Florida, the state's Gold Coast, is a busy hive of construction. Construction jobs require dynamite—in the coral-based earth of Florida, exceptionally large quantities of it. In their attempt to trace the dynamite and through it the criminals, the police have discovered, to their dismay, that stealing unguarded dynamite from construction jobs after dark requires little more surreptitiousness than does trespassing. Questioning of activist extremists in the segregation movement and others continues. Involved in the investigation are the Miami Police Dept., the Miami Beach Police Dept., and the Sheriff's office. In addition, State's Attorney Richard E. Gerstein, the young prosecutor who last year picked up, interrogated, and publicly exposed John Kasper, dramatically declared his office's official interest in the bombing by convening the three law enforcement agencies and co-ordinating their activities. More recently, the newly appointed Dade County Grand Jury has been charged with investigating the Beth El bombing.

AS WITH any crime, the determination of motive is perhaps the first step along the road to solution. For days one phase of the

investigation revolved around belief that the bombing might have been an "inside job." Beth El, police discovered, was divided into bickering camps. Indeed, some days before the devastating blast, its rabbi had resigned to assume a new post. This hypothesis was not, however, borne out by investigation. Somewhere along the line police learned for themselves that when Jews in a synagogue fall out with one another, the losing faction does not bomb the *shul* but builds another one. Another notion, that the bombing was an act of intimidation perpetrated by anti-Semites, has persisted. For in addition to bombs having served over the years as a kind of signature for psychopathic racists, and in addition to the racist telephone calls made in both Nashville and Miami hard on the heels of the detonations, the bombing method used in both cities suggests planned intimidation rather than wantonness.

In Nashville, only two hours before the explosion, the Center had been crowded with families and children; it is easy to imagine the carnage that might have resulted if the bombs had gone off earlier than they did. Also, had the bombers set their charges in a different place, the building would have been completely demolished. For in order to get to the door where the dynamite charge was placed, the criminals had to pass an alleyway where they must have observed two open windows leading into the boiler room—if they had chosen to toss the dynamite through these windows, which are open at all times to allow fumes to escape, the building would have been completely destroyed. In the Miami case, too, had the bombers used burlap, had they chosen to place their charge somewhat differently, the entire structure would have been leveled. Seeing that both crimes strongly suggest the handiwork of men who know their trade well, the theory that the acts were warnings or attempts to intimidate remains a working premise for the investigation.

The violence of 1951, the telephone calls to Rabbi Silverman and Rabbi Levitan, the manner in which the charges were set in Nashville and in Miami, and indeed the

bombing attempts in Charlotte and Gastonia, North Carolina, in November 1957 and February 1958, respectively—all these point plainly enough to the existence of a racist motive (though one must always bear in mind the possibility that in the end the Nashville and Miami bombings were coincidental. If organized racism lies behind the bombings, is there a social ferment in the South today producing these acts of violence and the more recent bombing attempts at Jacksonville and Birmingham, and can we expect the Southern ferment to produce further acts of racially motivated violence?

In the past two years Florida has been inundated with inflammatory hate literature. Bulk shipments of *Common Sense*, published by Conde McGinley of Union, New Jersey, and of the *American Nationalist*, published by Frank Britton of Inglewood, California, arrive regularly. Some of it is distributed at meetings of Klan groups and of some White Citizens Councils. Much of it turns up in anonymous mailings postmarked in Sarasota, St. Petersburg, Tampa, and Miami. Invariably the material hysterically relates "mongrelization" of the white race to a "Jew" or "Jew-Zionist" or "Jew-Zionist-Communist" plot. Often, locally mimeographed or printed efforts are enclosed as mail fillers. The mailings range from handsomely printed and colored window stickers reminding readers that it is the Jew and not the Negro who threatens Southern ways, and that Arthur Spingarn, President of the NAACP, is Jewish, not Negro, to crudely mimeographed paper sheets with the legend:

Join the Jewish
Kommunist Kremlin Kikes

HELP SAVE THE WORLD FOR THE NEGROES
AND THE jews

The literature is mailed in huge batches and in sometimes seemingly indiscriminate fashion. Jews are often included in the mailing lists. Attorneys, shopkeepers, newspapermen, state and local officials are regularly solicited. In some instances the mailings are signed and go beyond the mere expression of group

libels. One such, a Florida KKK recruitment letter which enjoyed currency in Nashville, provided Miami police with an early lead. It assured parents of school-age children that at meetings of Klan cells to which they were being invited, "There will be bomb lessons and how to handle fire and gasoline"; the letter was signed, "M. B. Sherrill, Grand Imperial Wizard." M. B. Sherrill is currently chairman of the St. Lucie county White Citizens Council of Florida.

IN FLORIDA it is mainly the rural, or "cracker," world for which this fare is provided, one whose traditional hostility toward the big city is further excited by a fundamentalist envy and scorn for the pleasure domes of Miami Beach. It is a world intruded upon by a remote, taloned and scaled dragon, the Supreme Court; it is a world shaken by the vibrations of South Florida urbanization; its confusion and resentment are part and parcel of the persecuted minority complex which the South has felt since before the Civil War. The cracker—it is a term of prideful self-description—has lived with Negroes all his life and consequently "knows" that they are incapable of being responsible for the social revolution decreed in the Supreme Court's school decisions. The domestic and field hands he has known, who have deferred to him and mistreated him and assured him of their lack of interest in integration, cannot be projected into the image of mover and shaker in Washington, D. C. The outsiders who have wrought fleshy Miami Beach, the outsiders with the New York money and the secret influence in Washington, D. C., far more credibly fit that role. The bully who, bomb in hand, does battle with that enemy is socially undesirable, but he is fighting an acknowledged invader, he is fighting *back*. He is fighting the entire cracker-world's battle—he is, so to speak, an underground fighter in a "people's war."

A year ago last March I stepped into this "embattled" world. The Ku Klux Klan in Florida had staged a series of rallies ranging in size from audiences of three to seven hun-

dred. John Kasper was in Florida and he was featured as a guest speaker at a Klan rally in Inverness, some sixty miles north of Tampa, in the middle of the "cracker" country. I attended the rally with Robert S. Bird of the New York *Herald Tribune*. Here is his description of the setting:

The speaker stood on a small wooden platform under a grove of live oak trees festooned with Spanish moss at the edge of a big field. At either side of the platform two 10-foot wooden crosses were flaming and a row of torches was set in a semi-circle around the platform. These were smudge pots that gave off both light and a misty, theatrical smoke. Standing guard around the platform were six robed, hooded and masked figures, in white garb, in crimson and blue.

The flames bathed the thickly moss draped oaks in a ghostly light and revealed in several of the trees the loud speakers that were carrying the oratorical virulence out into the Florida night.

Immediately in front of the platform was ranged a half-circle of about 70 men and women in ordinary Saturday night clothes. There were many in zipper jackets, slacks and work pants. Men predominated, especially younger men. In the circle of the fire bath, about 100 automobiles were parked in three rows on the edge of a field which stretched far into the shadowy distance. Some 200 persons, none of them in Klan regalia, sat in their cars in the manner of an audience at a drive-in movie theatre.

The night was chill and the star-spangled vault of the Florida heavens seemed contrived for the occasion. Even the half moon that was climbing into the skies gave off nothing more than a pale malevolence that only enhanced the eeriness of the scene.

The rally was a segregationist one. The loudest exclamations, however, the auto-honking that filled the night air, were in response not to anti-Negro but to anti-Semitic diatribes.

"If Ike wants to involve us in the Middle East, instead of sending Americans out there let him send American Yids to fight for Israel."

"God stamped ugliness on the face of the Jew for the same reason that he put rattlers on the snake."

"We don't hate the good nigger. A good nigger is black on the outside, but a Jew is

white on the outside and black inside. We've got to segregate the Jew to the same second class citizenship that the nigger thinks he has but don't really have."

Whereas mention of "niggers" seemed to call forth no more than strong disapproval in the mob, the terms "Jew," "Yid," "Kike," and "Zionist" caused them to stir angrily.

THAT the active Klan is a small, tawdry, dwindling affair perhaps requires restating. At the same time it must be remembered that racial violence is generally the work of tawdry, miniscule minorities, social criminals acting out of conviction rather than ordinary criminals seeking profit or vengeance—individual extremists who rise for a stark, dramatic moment from a class or group in *extremis*. But it would be error to view the Klan only as an isolated extremist group. To do so would lead too facilely to the conclusion that the Klan can be snuffed out by proscription against its existence or by incarceration of its leaders. The Klan today represents much more a state of mind than it does an organization. It is a distraught and desperate state of mind, excited by and in tune with the call to "massive resistance" vociferated by the dominant political leaders of the South. Indeed, the segregation-at-all-costs theme of the Klan and its city cousins, the White Citizens Councils, is so in tune with much of the prevailing respectable Southern political expression that one is sometimes hard put to it to distinguish their voice in the chorus. The Klan and the White Citizens Councils must therefore be viewed as an integral part of the Southern "massive resistance" to desegregation rather than as isolated, dissident groups.

Today, the distinguishing, unique contribution of the Klan and of many White Citizens Councils to the South's "total war" is—anti-Semitism. The tolerance accorded to this anti-Semitism helps to spread it. This was evidenced some months ago in Pensacola, Florida, a city which for some time now has been receiving large mailings of hate literature. Rear Admiral John G. Crommelin, Jr., retired, a forceful advocate of the White

Citizens Councils, was addressing the local Daughters of the American Revolution at that time. Four hundred ladies were present, the city's social, political, and financial elite on the distaff side. The Admiral, discussing segregation among other subjects, launched a tirade against a "hidden force" of "Zionist individuals," and proposed to overcome this "force" with Christian principles "in a bloodless way, if possible." He cited Kol Nidre, repeating the old canard that the prayer requires a renunciation of all other vows and oaths a Jew might make. "Many Jews are members of the Masons," he continued. "They took long oaths before joining this organization. Which set of oaths are we to believe they are violating?" he pointedly queried. At the close of his remarks, two ladies left. One was Jewish, the other the wife of a Jew. The rest of the audience remained. There was goodly applause, there were questions, all friendly, there was no apology, then or later, for the speaker's remarks. One can be sure that many of the ladies present must have been offended; but they bore their hurt silently. Their silence was only a small part of the omnipresent silence that envelopes the "moderate" South today, a silence that gives encouragement to the demagogue and a kind of left-handed

countenance to lawless acts of violence.

Sometimes the silent ones have an opportunity to speak—in the privacy of the polling booth. In Florida, they spoke clearly for the "moderate" segregationist, Governor LeRoy Collins. But 125,000 votes were also cast for the second-runner, General Sumter Lowry, candidate of the White Citizens Councils. That is a goodly sized extremist group—anywhere. Sometimes the silence is shattered by a bomb, and then everybody starts talking at once—about the Klan and not about "massive resistance," nor their own silence of a moment ago, nor the symbiotic relation the Klan state of mind enjoys with that of the respectable South today. But even so it requires the bombing of a "Jewish church" or two to break the silence. In the past eighteen months there have been fully two score bombings in the South of Negro homes and Negro institutions. These blasts echoed fleetingly and then were quickly swallowed in the customary silence.

Hopefully, the bombings of Jewish institutions have served to rouse the silent South to the danger posed by the extremists in its midst—if so, it is ironical that the Southern Jew, whose own silence has been so pronounced and emphatic, should serve as the alarm bell.